

## Vietnam Generation

---

Volume 2

Number 2 *Kent and Jackson State: 1970-1990*

Article 28

---

1-1995

# "Mediated Reality" of Kent State: The Friction Between Fact and Fiction

J. Gregory Payne

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.lasalle.edu/vietnamgeneration>



Part of the [American Studies Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Payne, J. Gregory (1995) "'Mediated Reality" of Kent State: The Friction Between Fact and Fiction," *Vietnam Generation*: Vol. 2 : No. 2 , Article 28.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.lasalle.edu/vietnamgeneration/vol2/iss2/28>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by La Salle University Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Vietnam Generation by an authorized editor of La Salle University Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [careyc@lasalle.edu](mailto:careyc@lasalle.edu).

# **“Mediated Reality” of Kent State: The Friction Between Fact and Fiction**

**J. Gregory Payne**

One of the major themes of a book I published ten years after the shootings on May 4, 1970, *Mayday: Kent State*, was the belief that a decade, and the culmination of the legal battles, would provide the needed perspective for a less passionate assessment of the shootings and the people that it touched. Thus, in 1990, as we commemorate the twentieth anniversary of an event that signaled the beginning of the end to America's involvement in the Vietnam war, one could assume that such a twenty year vantage point would provide the opportunity to finally piece together an accurate, factual and widely accepted answer to the public and journalists overriding concern for who, what, when, where and why.

Yet a review of the large body of information dealing with the Kent State shootings reveals divergent and conflicting explanations of responsibility, culpability, accountability and significance even after twenty years of careful and exhaustive study. The sole point of agreement seems to lie in the assertion that, to an entire generation, Kent State is a beacon whose bright, troublesome beam still continues to serve as a marker of divisiveness, mistrust, and a failure in ethical and moral leadership.

An indication of the lasting impact of the Kent State shootings, and of the eventual settlement on an accepted history, is NBC's February, 1981 docudrama *Kent State*. Even with its disappointing audience share, the docudrama reached over eighteen million people. Nationally broadcast one year later, *Kent State* is available for rental on videocassette worldwide. With the relatively short life cycle of printed books, and the small audience interested in scholarly articles and research, the docudrama is easily the most dominant “mediated reality” of the May 1970 events at Kent State.

Viewers tend to regard *Kent State* as historically accurate, and not affected by dramatic embellishment. Given television's dominance as a popular culture medium, and its major impact in melding the public's perceptions of current and past events, further study of the *Kent State* docudrama is warranted in the attempt to assess the production's actual historical accuracy and the decisions which influenced the creation of the final product. Employing a method similar to that used by Louis Cusella in his enlightening critique of the movie, this essay offers an empirical assessment of the *Kent State* production<sup>1</sup>.

## The Docudrama Genre

Today, due to its pervasive impact on the inculcation of values, norms and beliefs, and its ability to shape not only our present and future but to define and modify our perception of the past, television has been called America's new religion.<sup>2</sup> Americans, who average seven hours of daily telecommunion, now have a mediated reality based on television, rather than a world view derived from diverse sources. Hence, television plays a significant role in defining our nation's frame of reference. Describing the distinct characteristics of the television medium, Gerbner and Connolly write:

Television requires no mobility... television does not require literacy. Unlike print, it provides information about the world to the poorly educated and the illiterate. In fact, for those who do not read (by choice or inability), television is a major source of information, much of which comes from what is called entertainment. Television is unique in all history. There is little age-grading of the symbolic materials that socialize members into community. Television tells its stories to people of all age groups at the same time. Television presents its message, and, most importantly, unlike books, movies, etc., most people use television *nonselectively*.<sup>3</sup>

### Docudrama: Fact/Fiction?

*The most important thing in doing any historical piece like a piece on Kent State is being accountable: accountable to the friends and parents, to the facts themselves. People should be forced to look facts in the face to prevent events like Kent from happening in the future. The audience should never be able to say, "That's Hollywood." It should make them think.*

—Mary Dollarhide, actress in the theatrical production *Kent State: A Requiem*<sup>4</sup>

Docudrama often adopts a historical plot and theme but employs dramatic license in various modes to enhance the viewer's interest.<sup>5</sup> Acknowledging this mode to have been popular with Shakespeare, Dickens, Steinbeck, and others aiming to entertain as well as to highlight perceived injustices of their time, *Boston Globe* columnist Jack Thomas nonetheless views the television docudrama format as problematic:

Docudramas have the potential to educate as well as to entertain but they also represent a threat to truth because viewers have no way of knowing where documentary ends and dramatization begins.... Of all the indignities heaped upon us by television, none is more dangerous than the business of re-staging the past, of blurring fact and fiction so that we lose our sense of what is true and what is not.<sup>6</sup>

This perspective is not shared by all television critics. *USA Today*'s Ben Brown concludes that no one "has an exclusive claim on 'the truth,'" and

maintains there are always "more sources...more angles...more ways to look at the same set of circumstances." Recapitulating similar attacks in the past by "reality guardians," Brown writes:

Should we measure Monet's lily pads by the standards of botanical photography? ...the same people who are screaming for an end to "docudrama" are in even more dangerous territory. Afraid that we're not capable of being good media consumers, they want to license truth-tellers. Journalists get a membership card; artists need not apply.<sup>7</sup>

To what extent can television historically portray an event if dramatic license is favored by directors, producers, writers, and network executives solely to enhance advertising profits by keeping the viewers entertained? The widespread dependence on the television medium for entertainment and information suggests that there are ethical considerations facing today's docudramatist, especially in light of the findings of Elihu Katz on the impact of the medium's mediated reality: "In effect the media event as it actually happens is less important than the event as represented by television. The broadcast is what the mass media audience reacts to—not what actually takes place."<sup>8</sup>

What were the definitions, expectations, and responsibilities of the docudrama format among those involved in "Kent State?" How did these differ from those outlined in the academic critiques of the movie by agents removed from the production process? What were the strengths and limitations of this format? Four critiques of the film offer insights into these important areas of concern.

In his analysis of *Kent State*, Cusella identifies "information constraints...that face every television docudrama," due to the "very nature of the form."<sup>9</sup> Such limitations require the docudramatist to make choices. In *Kent State*, he argues, the result of such decision making was a rhetorical purgation to "correct, refine, and cleanse the image of the four students who were killed."<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, he describes the limitations of the docudrama format, and offers his overall evaluation of the production: "*Kent State* may be classified...as real fiction because the historical event and the characters never can be depicted with the breadth and depth or detail in which they emerged and can never be totally susceptible to empirical verification."<sup>11</sup>

John David, in a comparative critique of the television docudrama and the stage production *Kent State: A Requiem*, concludes that the play was more "historically accurate" and "dramatically powerful."<sup>12</sup> Yet he praises a commercial network's attempt to reach millions with a "film based on a subject that still elicits very strong responses from both sides of the political spectrum." Like Cusella, David comments on the constraints and dominant influence of the television medium.

The “cathartic” objective identified by Cusella and the “significance of the event” rationale discussed by David are recognized by D. Ray Heisey and Carl M. Moore as only two of the possible intents or purposes of the docudramatist.<sup>13</sup> In addressing the genre in general and the *Kent State* film in particular, Heisey and Moore strongly assert the claim for a purely factual approach to the presentation of history, especially if the work is advertised as the “truth.” They suggest the following eight steps will satisfy the “burden of truth” for docudrama:

- 1) Not omitting significant materials.
- 2) Not adding untrue material.
- 3) Not embellishing.
- 4) Avoiding methodological errors.
- 5) Acknowledging production constraints.
- 6) Verifying realities included.
- 7) Seeking alternate interpretations.
- 8) Acknowledging the rationale for inclusion and exclusion.<sup>14</sup>

In applying these prerequisites to *Kent State*, Heisey and Moore conclude the film failed to meet the “burden of truth.”

Jerry M. Lewis, in his critique of *Kent State*, argues the docudrama format makes “special truth claims that need to be rigorously evaluated.” Classifying *Kent State* as a “panoramic docudrama,” which he defines as combining the “documentary format with drama by placing composite or totally fictional characters in real events,” Lewis summarizes the crucial concerns of the critic: “In docudrama the analyst must evaluate not only the film’s dramatic qualities but the accuracy of the factual aspects of the film as well.”<sup>15</sup> Judging the film to be “visually accurate” and “chronologically correct,” Lewis, nonetheless, concurs with Heisey and Moore that *Kent State* is flawed by “factual errors” which seriously challenge its validity.<sup>16</sup>

## **DocuDRAMA or DOCUdrama: Whose View Will Dominate?**

*A nation is the creation of its historians, formal and informal.*  
—Kenneth Boulding<sup>17</sup>

*How much do we see on television that really raises our conscience?  
Today's television tries to trivialize anything in its path.*  
—Norman Lear<sup>18</sup>

The period since the airing of *Kent State* and the publication of the book in February, 1981, and reviews of the movie have crystalized some important philosophical debates on docudrama, specifically among principals involved in the production, and those authors of scholarly critiques of the

movie. These widely divergent and opposing viewpoints are in keeping with the general confusion surrounding the making of *Kent State*.

I served as the historical consultant to NBC's *Kent State*, and as a principal source for the movie, and I can thus afford some insight into the various historical-dramatic conflicts precipitated by the docudrama format.

From the initial meeting with Max and Micheline Keller, executive producers of the film, it was apparent that our views coincided on the goals of *Kent State*. The docudrama format should be similar to the initial approach of the first great filmmaker, Lumiere: to tell a story based on the fact without dramatic embellishment.<sup>19</sup> The author's concern, shared by parents of the dead and wounded students, as well as many other researchers, met Heisey and Moore's "burden of truth:" the movie should follow a historically accurate storyline and theme. It should rely on more credible accounts of the 1970 incident than the announced principal source, James A. Michener's *Kent State: What Happened and Why*.<sup>20</sup> The Michener account had been the selling point for the networks, but was widely assailed for inaccuracies and the author's proclivity to employ literary license.<sup>21</sup> The Keller's support of a historically accurate presentation guaranteed that more credible accounts and additional substantive information would be provided to Gerald Green during his initial script writing period.<sup>22</sup> Thus, from the onset the attempt was made to satisfy Heisey and Moore's requisites, to present "alternative interpretations of events, characters, and messages... to allow the 'truth' to be challenged and tested by alternative accounts... to guard against any embellishments."<sup>23</sup>

*Facts are not as important as dramatic impact.*

—production member of *Kent State*<sup>24</sup>

Director Jim Goldstone and executive producer Phillip Barry held a view of docudrama which contrasted with the Kellers and my own. The discussions held, and decisions made throughout the project revealed that they favored a generally accurate story line but reserved the right to exercise varying degrees of dramatic license to ensure the project was entertaining. This approach echoed the sentiments of another great pioneer in film: Melies, who opposed the strict realist approach of Lumiere and opted for artistic imagination in his films.<sup>25</sup> They downplayed the following areas of importance, which were deemed crucial by the historical consultant to *Kent State*:

- 1) The need for substantiation and verification of facts through cross-referencing of sources.
- 2) The overriding importance of historically significant events even if they interfered with the production's overall dramatic theme.
- 3) The need to adequately establish the historical and political context of the tragic event.



- 4) The problems which composite individuals cause by altering the historical reality presented to the viewing audience.<sup>26</sup>

Goldstone maintained that artistic license allowed directors of docudrama to take the necessary liberties to enhance, dramatize, and compress the message in order that it be intriguing to the viewer.

*The story-line should be focused on the romance of Allison Krause and her boyfriend with the shootings and events as background context.*

—Dennis Consadine, NBC movie executive<sup>27</sup>

NBC's input also reflected divergent perspectives on docudrama. Consadine favored making the film a backdrop for a romantic episode involving one of the victims and her boyfriend as they experienced their last weekend together. Yet other NBC personnel, namely Karen Danaher and Hamilton Cloud of the movie division, strongly supported every effort to emphasize the incident, to gather all the available facts, and to guarantee that the events of May 1-4, 1970, were portrayed accurately and within a meaningful historical context. Concurring with the historical consultant, their goal was to present the facts to the American people, to hopefully increase the understanding and consciousness of an event which had not been satisfactorily resolved or even thoroughly examined by the nation's judicial branch. This outlook, described by John David as "breaking the silence surrounding the Kent tragedy," stressed the necessity of keeping the 1970 events as the film's primary focus, rather than having them serve as a backdrop for a production characterized by fictionalized relationships, composite characters, and misconstrued events<sup>28</sup>.

Those favoring the factual approach recognized the limitations of the medium, as expressed by film critic Richard Meran Barsam:

[C]ontrary to popular belief, the facts do not speak for themselves, especially in the cinema. They require structure and interpretation, elements that reflect the filmmaker's vision.... when we acknowledge that film is an art, we also acknowledge that the purely factual film is something of an impossibility.<sup>29</sup>

The crucial and chronic problem was the question of whose vision would guide the production of *Kent State*, and how closely that perspective would satisfy the burden of truth.

Gerald Green's first script dispelled the belief that *Kent State* would be a whitewash of the facts. The storyline addressed all of the historically significant points. Questions regarding the mysterious ROTC fire were adequately explored. Viewers would be challenged to form their own conclusions about who actually set the fire. Green captured the flavor of the division between the townspeople of Kent and the university

community; he explored the roles various politicians played in precipitating the confrontation.

This first version was rejected by the network: their argument was that Green's script was too political, and lacked meaningful dramatic relationships. Green's script employed dramatic license sparingly; the writer emphasized a story line verified and substantiated through numerous credible sources. With full knowledge of the countless examples of error in the Michener book, the network still favored basing the movie around the work due to the author's commercial appeal.

*It's an outrage to history, to their good names, to put the victims in places where they weren't.*  
—Peter Davies<sup>30</sup>

As the release of production money from NBC was contingent upon a general agreement and acceptance of the script among all members of the production team, the Kellers agreed in the spring of 1980 to bring in Richard Kramer for a "dialogue polish." This "polish" was ordered to meet the demands of those who favored a more dramatic and less political script. Assurances were made to the "pro-history" forces that the polish would not result in major deviations from Green's story line. In early July, a revised script was reviewed. Historical accuracy had been sacrificed in favor of an emphasis on interpersonal relationships. Principals were now placed at events that they had not attended. Bill Schroeder and Sandy Scheuer, two of the victims of the Monday shootings, were included in a scene depicting the Friday, May 1 rally on the Commons. In fact, none of the four murdered students had been there. Schroeder, Scheuer, Krause and Miller were also shown watching the ROTC fire when, in reality, some of them were not even on campus at the time. Schroeder had left Kent on Friday night and did not return until late Sunday evening. Even more disconcerting were the rather maudlin portrayals of town and state officials. Had they been just "befuddled" victims of the situation that weekend, as the revised script suggested?

The pro-history faction submitted nineteen single-spaced pages of criticisms, covering everything from inaccurate personal characteristics to entire scenes which were misconceived and unsubstantiated. For example, the screenplay seemed to strongly suggest that "radicals" had started the ROTC fire on May 2. In fact, after years of controversy, there is no proof that they set the blaze. The breakdown in communication among various officials at Kent—city, university and state officers—was another problem the revised script glossed over. Thus, Mayor Satrom's decision to call in the National Guard lacked context.

It was equally disturbing to the pro-history faction that *all* of the national guardsmen were depicted as young and inexperienced in riot control. Many



eighteen-year-olds had joined the guard to avoid going to Vietnam, and there was irony in showing college-age kids pitted against college students. Yet in meeting the burden of truth, the historical interpretation should not imply that it was primarily youthful guardsmen who fired the fatal shots. Evidence from the trials and the FBI report revealed that many of those who turned and fired were older guardsmen who had several years of riot training. Did the guard actually shoot because they panicked, as suggested in the script? Surely many of the guards had been in situations much worse than that which they faced at Kent—Governor Rhodes had called out the National Guard forty times during the period from 1968 to 1970.

Neither did the script meet the burden of truth in replicating the Guard's march. Most of the guardsmen who actually discharged their weapons were members of Troop G. Many of the same men had, moments earlier, knelt on the football field and aimed their rifles at protesters in the Prentice Hall parking lot. As all the soldiers marched back towards the commons, many of the members of Troop G looked back over their right shoulders. The guardsmen ascended Blanket Hill near the pagoda and momentarily disappeared behind the crest of the knoll. Twenty-eight of them spun around 180 degrees, marched back to the hilltop pagoda, and fired at students in the parking lot hundreds of yards away. The guard did not shoot into the larger group of students on the patio in front of Taylor Hall.<sup>31</sup>

The evidence showed the "dialogue polish" to be radically different in approach from the first script. Dramatic license was now characteristic of the project, and there was little emphasis on historical fact. Finally, the script now focused on the love affair between Barry Levine and Allison Krause.

The historical consultant informed the Kellers that an initial letter sent earlier to NBC in support of the accuracy of the Green script would now be refuted by another letter. It would assail the new dramatic approach for a failure to capture the context of, and significant events which took place during, the Kent State shootings, and criticize the dramatic embellishments. Other production team members who had favored the approach represented in Green's script also strongly protested the so-called dialogue polish. Complicating matters was the threat of parents of the dead students to sue to stop production if particular facts were ignored.

The conflict over the script continued throughout the production of the film. Production, publicity, and editing meeting were characterized by heated arguments. Several members of the production team threatened to quit the project unless a more accurate story line was adopted. Discussions, negotiations, and trade-offs were extensive and ongoing, and involved almost every scene in the script.

## *"Mediated Reality"*

*It's difficult to understand why the writer who turns history into docudrama insists on making us see things that never were and never bothers to ask themselves why or why not.*

—John Sigenthaler<sup>12</sup>

As the production team assembled in Alabama in May in preparation for the shoot, the historical consultant, involved in summer school in California and not privy to the decisions made on location, was summoned to Hollywood and asked to prepare "detailed fact sheets" of the events of May 1-4, 1970. The detailed fact sheets were supposed to aid Richard Kramer's rewrite efforts on location in Alabama. During the process of preparing and sending these documented fact sheets, several tersely worded requests from the director and producer Barry were relayed through the Kellers for further substantiation and documentation *by mail* of the material provided to Kramer. Facts which contradicted the Michener book were of special concern. Clearly, the burden of proof was on the historical consultant to verify his data and research rather than on the dramatic forces to defend their fictionalized account. The only source provided to Kramer in Alabama for the re-writes was the Michener book.

*Come to Alabama, but don't talk to the actors or the writer.*

—Jim Goldstone, director<sup>13</sup>

Confusion reigned on the Alabama set, and in the Hollywood office of Interplanetary Productions. As the production date neared, with the script in complete disarray, the historical consultant was invited to join the production team in Alabama. On location, however, contact between the historical consultant, the writer, actors, and other production personnel was deliberately limited. Formally, all communication among the principals was to be filtered through Goldstone. As a result numerous underground meetings provided the only opportunity to share research materials and slides, to acquaint those interested with various accounts of the event and aftermath. It was clear from these meetings that most of the actors were of the opinion that the movie should concur as closely as possible with the events of the 1970 tragedy. Actors frequently changed the dialogue during the actual filming, offering a more factual interpretation of the event represented.

*The audience should be confused about the ROTC [fire] because no one knows to this day who actually set it. We can't assign blame when history can't verify it.*

—Jeff McCracken, actor<sup>14</sup>

One example of such a troublesome scene was the May 2 ROTC fire. Charles Thomas of the National Archives suggests that outside agent provocateurs might have actually set the ROTC fire. The script insinuates

that the students started the blaze, though the FBI report and other reports failed to identify those responsible.

Some members of the production staff found police ineptitude in the case of the ROTC fire “unbelievable.” After the historical consultant provided substantiation for their assertions, dramatic forces countered with the argument that to depict the scene as such would confound the audience.

*What we are doing is all fact... it's not a docudrama.*  
—Jim Goldstone, Director<sup>35</sup>

One of the most disturbing elements of the struggle between the two factions was the tendency of the dramatic forces to de-emphasize their own attempt to embellish. During interviews conducted in the editing period, the director and other members of the production team publicly stated that *Kent State* was “all fact.” Attempts by the historical consultant to correct this misinterpretation were often met with surprise and verbal reprimands by members of the production team and network. Their argument was that *Kent State* was the first docudrama to have such extensive input from a historical consultant actually on location with the director and production team. Mere presence on the set was employed as a datum to support the argument, ironically waged by the dramatic forces, of the “factual” approach they maintained characterized *Kent State*.<sup>36</sup> The claim of truth, according to one executive, means ten extra rating points.<sup>37</sup>

*Kent State* marked the first time each scene of a final script had been completely annotated using a cross-reference of sources. Given the controversy surrounding the May 4 incident and the numerous interpretations offered to explain that event, NBC's legal department required each scene be substantiated to obtain an errors and omissions insurance policy for the movie. The constant struggle between the pro-history and dramatic forces resulted in the script undergoing eight revisions during the course of the production. The final script comprised 227 pages, with 563 scenes. The annotated script was later included in the NBC press package as proof of the entire film's emphasis on “fact.” Absent was an explanation of the intense pressure and ongoing negotiations which resulted in some scenes being substantiated by Michener's work only as a trade-off for more accurate depictions of more crucial events in the movie. There was no discussion of the fact that much of the dramatic material which found its way into the film had done so by way of Michener's publication, and only in the face of heated protests.

Compounding the controversy between factions during the postproduction and editing phases of the project was the change in airdate for the film. In the fall of 1981, as the director attempted to piece together the story from the eight reels of film shot for each scene, the producer was informed that the network would air the movie during February “sweeps

week," rather than on the eleventh anniversary of the incident, as originally planned. The added pressure to produce a final product heightened the number and intensity of conflicts between the pro-history and dramatic forces. So pressed were the director and producer to meet the deadline that the final cut of the movie did not include the recorded musical soundtrack, featuring Grace Slick, Richie Havens, and others.

NBC opted to run a historical docudrama against CBS's television premier of Burt Reynolds in *Hooper*, and ABC's remake of the sensual hit *East of Eden*. NBC's decision meant the network would remind Americans of Kent State only four weeks after Ronald Reagan had been inaugurated president, and at a time when America was celebrating with parades and other patriotic activities the end of the Iran-hostage ordeal.

The controversy and lack of agreement on the goals of production which earmarked the making of *Kent State* also characterized the reviews of the film. Generally, critics accepted the claim of the *New York Times* that the "ambitious and cumulatively powerful" television movie was "factual," and most reviews were favorable.<sup>38</sup> Ohio's largest newspaper, the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, concluded: "the flaws were inconsequential compared to the way it showed the political and personal realities which turned an antiwar protest at an obscure Ohio university into a national shame."<sup>39</sup> The *Los Angeles Herald Examiner* judged the film to be a "clean, largely accurate frightening look at the deaths of four students."<sup>40</sup> Those familiar with the controversy surrounding the 1970 incident and its aftermath identified particular inaccuracies, and what one victim's mother termed a lack of "political depth."<sup>41</sup> *Los Angeles Times* columnist Howard Rosenberg blasted the film for deleting the important historical and political context of the event, and the failure to include evidence of possible White House involvement in the tragedy and the alleged cover up of the incident by the Justice Department in the years that followed: "If truth did become a victim of the 1970 Kent State tragedy, as many have charged, the same can be said of Sunday night's three-hour TV movie depicting it."<sup>42</sup>

The confusion evident in the production process was also apparent to some reviewers. Michael Munzel of the *San Francisco Chronicle* described the film as "a fragmentary picture, lots of little things which fail to add up to a whole. It's like looking at a Byzantine mosaic carefully reconstructed from the rubble of an ancient wall—an impression emerges but too many tiles are missing for the image to be clear."<sup>43</sup>

Attacking the profit motive of television and the inherent need to present "dramatic hysteria" to achieve high Nielsen ratings, Daniel Henninger termed the film "moralistic chin-dribble."<sup>44</sup> His review suggested that American television adhere to the principle of "the honest truth" in such film visions. *Newsday* viewed the film as a valuable prod to convince Americans to remember the tragic event but again faulted the film for its "lack of historical context."<sup>45</sup>

Parents and friends of the slain students and those wounded at Kent State identified dramatic liberties evident in the production, but concluded that the final product was “far better than we had anticipated... the film achieves what we had hoped for: a visual recounting of the *Justice Department’s Summary of the FBI Investigation*.”<sup>46</sup> Mrs. Florence Schroeder, mother of ROTC honor student Bill Schroeder, killed at Kent State, judged the film to “finally show how senseless the murders were. People have called and said they never knew it was like that... Bill was so far away.”<sup>47</sup>

Author Peter Davies criticized the film’s lack of political depth and its indication that “four young people were so wrongfully killed, *not* that the *shooting* itself was wrong.” Nonetheless, Davies praised the film as an important medium to portray the horror of the event to millions.<sup>48</sup> Dean Kahler and Robbie Stamps, both wounded at Kent State in 1970, concluded the film was cathartic and powerfully effective in presenting the “innocence of the students at the time of the shooting.”<sup>49</sup> Upon receiving his Emmy Award for “Outstanding Directing,” Jim Goldstone told the viewing audience he accepted the award as a “tribute to the memory of Allison, Jeff, Sandy and Bill, and the terrible injustice that still plagues the Kent State killings.”<sup>50</sup>

## Conclusion

Evidence presented in this paper highlights the diverse viewpoints, expectations and opinions of those directly involved in NBC’s *Kent State*. The experiences of the *Kent State* production vividly illustrate the degree and extent of difficulty facing those agents seeking to achieve historical integrity in an inherently dramatic medium. The findings of this essay further highlight the problems facing the critic in the effort “to evaluate not only the film’s dramatic qualities but the accuracy of the factual aspects of the film as well.”<sup>51</sup>

The task of the critic is compounded by the fact that docudramas such as *Kent State* represent more than just entertainment for the viewing audience. The docudramatist must bear the ultimate responsibility for the fairness and accuracy of these productions. To millions of Americans, NBC’s *Kent State* serves as the official public interpretation of the events of May 4, 1970, at Kent State.

It is essential that ethical, judicial, cultural, and political factors remain priorities in the production of docudramas such as *Kent State*. In watching docudramas on such controversial events as the shootings at Kent State, the public frequently performs a neglected forensic function. It serves as judge—rendering the verdict of public opinion on the troublesome historical event. It is on this point that the NBC docudrama factually and dramatically makes a most important contribution to the history of Kent State: it boldly conveys to future generations of viewers the veracity of the

1970 President's Commission finding that the shootings were "unwarranted, unnecessary and inexcusable."<sup>52</sup>

## Notes

*The author would like to thank Jane Pierce, David Calusdian and Dr. Scott C. Ratzan for their help on this project. Parts of this essay were presented and included in the Proceedings of the Second National Conference on Television and Ethics, Boston, MA, 6 March 1987. The author acknowledges the assistance of the Political Communication News Study Group of Emerson College and the Division of Communication Studies.*

- <sup>1</sup> Louis Cusella, "Real Fiction Versus Historical Reality: Rhetorical Purification in *Kent State*—The Docudrama," *Communication Quarterly* 30.3 (Summer 1982): 159-164. See also J.A. McCall and J.L. Simms, *Issues in Participant Observation* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley) 1969.
- <sup>2</sup> George Gerbner and Kathleen Connolly, "Television as a New Religion," in Michael Emery and Ted Curtis Smythe, eds., *Readings in Mass Communication* (Dubuque: WC Brown) 1980: 21-28.
- <sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>4</sup> Mary Dollarhide, interview with the author, 22 October 1981.
- <sup>5</sup> For a discussion of docudrama see Hoffer and Nelson, "Evolution of Docudrama on American Television Networks," *Southern Speech Communication Journal* 45: 149-163. See also Carl H. Moore and D. Ray Heisey, "The Burden of Truth: Historical Accuracy vs. Dramatic License," paper presented at the Speech Communication Association Annual Convention, Anaheim, CA, November 1981, in which the authors assimilate Hoffer and Nelson's modes into the following: verifiable recreations of events and characters; recreation of events with fictional or composite character; recreation of characters with fictional or composite events; and, speculations of what might have happened to real persons or at real events.
- <sup>6</sup> Jack Thomas, *Boston Globe* (9 Feb 1985): 21.
- <sup>7</sup> Ben Brown, *USA Today* (8 Feb 1985): 12a.
- <sup>8</sup> Elihu Katz, "As the World Watches," *Media and Values* 25 (Fall 1983): 3.
- <sup>9</sup> Cusella: 160.
- <sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>12</sup> John David, "From Stage to Celluloid: A Comparative Analysis of Historical Accuracy between *Kent State: A Requiem* and *Kent State*," paper presented at the Speech Communication Association's Annual Convention, Anaheim, CA, November 1981.
- <sup>13</sup> Heisey and Moore: 4.
- <sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*: 7.
- <sup>15</sup> Jerry M. Lewis, "Kent State—The Movie," *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 9 (Spring 1981 and Winter 1982): 16.
- <sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>17</sup> Kenneth E. Boulding, "National Images and International Systems," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 3 (1985): 20.
- <sup>18</sup> Norman Lear, keynote speech, "TV and Ethics: Who's Responsible?," Television and Ethics National Conference, sponsored by Emerson College and the National Academy of Television Arts and Sciences, Boston, MA, 6 December 1984.
- <sup>19</sup> In Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality*, excerpted in Gerald Mast and Marshall Cohen, *Film Theory and Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press) 1979: 10-11.
- <sup>20</sup> James A. Michener, *Kent State: What Happened and Why* (New York: Random) 1971.
- <sup>21</sup> Carl M. Moore and D. Ray Heisey, "Not a Great Deal of Error?" unpublished paper, Department of Speech, Kent State University, 1971; Heisey and Moore, "Burden of Truth:" 1-2. In this last article, the authors identify problems with Michener's research: Michener and his aides relied on memory and sketchy notes; persons whose behavior was described at length were never interviewed; direct quotes were attributed to people without authentication; certain "facts" were never verified; inaccurate newspaper stories were used in place of firsthand accounts; Michener modified the interviews provided him by at least one of his own assistants; and, the source of certain information is never properly credited in the work.



- 22 This material included J. Gregory Payne, "A Rhetorical Analysis of Selected Interpretation of the May 1970 Kent State Incident," Ph.D. dissertation, Dept. of Speech Communication, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (1977); Peter Davies, *The Truth About Kent State: A Challenge to the American Conscience* (New York: Farrar Strauss Giroux) 1973; Thomas Hensley and Jerry Lewis, *Kent State May 4th: A Social Science Perspective* (Dubuque: Kendall Hunt) 1978; Carl Moore and D. Ray Heisey, "Not a Great Deal of Error?"; Scott Bills, *Kent State: Ten Years After* (Kent: Kent Popular Press) 1980; I.F. Stone, *The Killings at Kent State: How Murder Went Unpunished* (New York: New York Review of Books) 1971; Joe Ezsterhas and Michael Roberts, *Thirteen Seconds* (New York: College Notes and Texts) 1970; Phillip Tompkins and E.V. Anderson, *Communication Crisis at Kent State* (New York: Gordon and Breach Science Publishers) 1971; John P. Adams, *At the Heart of a Whirlwind* (New York: Harper & Row) 1976; The President's Commission on Campus Unrest (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office) 1970; Ottativo M. Casale and Louis Paskoff, *The Kent Affair* (New York: Houghton Mifflin) 1971; *I Was There* (Lima, OH: CSS Publishing) 1974. In addition, articles, microfilms, and other related materials were provided from the "May 4 Archives" at both Kent State University and Yale University. Personal interviews with the following were also transcribed for the historical consultant: Barry Levine; Robbie Stamps; Mr. and Ms. Arthur Krause; Mr. and Ms. Martin Scheuer; Mr. and Ms. Louis Schroeder; Elaine Holstein; Alan Canfora; Chic Canfora; Sanford Rosen; David Engdahl; Glenn Frank; Rodney Biddle; Charles Fassinger; Raymond Srp; John E. Martin; James Ferris; Sgt. McManus; Okey Fisher; James Pierce; William Perkins; Myron Pryor; Russell Repp; Robert James; Jerry Lewis; Lloyd Thomas; Dan McGee; Harry Jones; Alexander Stevenson; Ron Kane; John Adams. These are the major interviews, but approximately 50 to 75 more were included in the material available to the writer.
- 23 Heisey and Moore, "Burden of Truth:" 5.
- 24 Kent State production assistant, interview with the author, June 1981.
- 25 In Kracauer: 10-11.
- 26 Personal list of considerations of historical consultant.
- 27 Dennis Consadine, NBC Movie Division Executive. This view was expressed in a Kent State publicity meeting in Burbank, CA, 22 November 1980.
- 28 David: 1.
- 29 Barsam, *Nonfiction Film*: 582.
- 30 Peter Davies, in conversation with the author, 5 June 1980.
- 31 In Lewis, *Kent State*: 15, the author does praise the movie's success in conveying the historical and dramatic movements leading up to the shooting: "From the tear gas game to the shooting, the film is visually quite accurate and compelling."
- 32 John Sighthaler, *USA Today* (28 January 1985): 1d.
- 33 Jim Goldstone, statement made to author.
- 34 Jeff McCracken, interview with the author, 10 August 1981.
- 35 *New York Times*, 8 February 1981.
- 36 *Ibid.*
- 37 "The Televised Past," *Television Quarterly* 16: 59-64.
- 38 *New York Times*, 8 February 1981.
- 39 *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, 9 February 1981.
- 40 *Los Angeles Herald Examiner*, 8 February 1981.
- 41 Elaine Holstein, correspondence with the author, 15 February 1981.
- 42 *Los Angeles Times*, 9 February 1981.
- 43 *San Francisco Chronicle*, 6 February 1981.
- 44 *Wall Street Journal*, 11 February 1981.
- 45 *Newsday*, 10 February 1981.
- 46 Arthur Krause, correspondence with the author, 15 February 1981.
- 47 Florence Schroeder, correspondence with the author, 12 February 1981.
- 48 Peter Davies, correspondence with the author, 14 February 1981.
- 49 Dean Kahler and Robbie Stamps, interview with the author, 28 January 1981. See Heisey and Moore, "Burden of Truth:" 7. Preliminary findings of a study by Heisey and Moore on reactions to the movie by those who were present at Kent State in 1970 reveal "four categories of objections: to the unwarranted making of the film itself, to the inaccurate physical setting, to the faulty portrayal of persons, and to the faulty portrayal of events and sequences."
- 50 Jim Goldstone, Emmy Award presentations, CBS, 24 September 1982.
- 51 Lewis: 16.
- 52 *President's Commission*: 287-290.